

Changing Perception of LGBT People

*Through Performances – Theater and
Television in America and in Japan*

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Abstract

This paper examines how LGBT representations in popular media have changed people's perception and is eventually changing society. American TV programs and theater have played significant roles in terms of advancement of LGBT issues. I look at three TV shows that made LGBT people visible in American society, and three revival theatrical productions on Broadway that urge us to look back at the history and keep fighting for equality. Compared to the U.S., Japan has a long way to go in terms of LGBT issues. However, social and political changes are happening especially in recent years. I analyze three recent TV shows shedding positive light on LGBT characters and argue that the change in Japan has been happening in a similar way which demonstrates how important these cultural representations are for the change.

Keywords: *LGBT, LGBT Characters on American TV, LGBT Characters in American Theater, LGBT Characters on Japanese TV*

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Introduction

America's dynamism in politics and social change is like a pendulum especially as it relates to the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) advancement in U.S. history. Just to look at it briefly, at least superficially, the lives of gay people improved as a result of gay liberation in the late 1960s and 1970s. During the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and the 1990s, there was a lot of discrimination and prejudice against people literally struggling for life. The AIDS epidemic exposed people's homophobia that was hidden just below the surface.

Under the previous Obama administration, LGBT recognition in the U.S. seemed to be only getting better; "Don't Ask Don't Tell," a policy under which gay, lesbian, or bisexual military members could not serve openly, was banned in 2011 and same-sex marriage became legal nationwide in 2016. Even so, there were still major problems such as hate crimes against transgender people.

Since the election of Donald J. Trump as president, (though it had already started during his presidential campaign,) the political situation around LGBT people in the U.S. has been receiving a significant backlash. During his campaign, Trump claimed that he was pro-LGBT. He said he was "much better for the gays" than his opponent Hillary Clinton because The Clinton Foundation accepted money from countries known for their discrimination against LGBT people and he had a tougher stance on immigration.¹ He thanked his Twitter followers for sending him congratulatory messages for him being right "on radical Islamic terrorism," which was right after 49 people, many of them gay, were killed in the Orlando mass shooting in 2016.²

Under his administration, officials who were known to have an anti-gay position were appointed, and the Justice Department withdrew guidance issued to schools on the treatment of transgender students.³ On Twitter in July 2017, Trump announced that he would ban transgender people from military and on March 23, 2018, released the order.⁴

It is crucial now to remind people how LGBT people fought for their rights and survival because everything they have achieved through their long struggle can be lost again. One important way to look back at how LGBT people have fought is to analyze how LGBT people have been visualized and accepted in American society through their cultural representations. In the U.S., TV programs and theater are two of the most important media which are playing a significant role in LGBT representation.

In a similar way, there are more and more LGBT representations in media recently in Japan. Although Japan is far behind compared to the U.S. in LGBT recognition in the society, the emergence of positive representations of LGBT people on recent TV programs shows the influence from progressive countries like the U.S. and how Japanese society is starting to catch up.

Television in the U.S.: Ellen, Will & Grace, and Looking

There have been a number of recent TV shows in the U.S. that have featured LGBT characters. GLAAD, a non-governmental media monitoring organization, found that among 895 regular characters on scripted TV shows in 2016, 43 were identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer.⁵ However, there was a time when featuring gay characters in TV shows was really controversial. The sitcom, *Ellen*, was without a doubt a pioneer. Also *Will & Grace*, in its politically cautious way, made it possible to feature a gay man as one of its central characters. *Looking* is more recent example depicting gay characters without any reservation.

Ellen – Too Gay?



Figure 1. Ellen DeGeneres coming out in Time magazine.

A situation comedy series, *Ellen*, starring Ellen DeGeneres, was broadcast from 1994 to 1998. In March 1996, before the start of the fourth season, DeGeneres came out at a staff meeting and they decided to have Ellen Morgan, the lead character played by DeGeneres also come out in the program. The episode in which she would come out was called by a code title, “The Puppy Episode.”⁶ There had been no gay lead in the history of American prime time television programming. Their plan was controversial enough to be kept secret. The show’s staff members talked it over with American Broadcasting Company (ABC) which broadcasted the program, and Walt Disney Company which owned ABC. The coming out would be done not only by the character Ellen Morgan but also by Ellen DeGeneres in real life.

In September 1996, the secret project was exposed by a media report. ABC did not give any comment on the issue and media sensation was aroused. Conservatives resisted the plan vehemently. Jerry Falwell, an American fundamentalist Baptist pastor, called DeGeneres “Ellen Degenerate.” Some people made a threat to boycott products of Disney. On the other hand, gay activist groups welcomed her coming out. They carried out an Internet campaign to recommend people in the closet to come out with Ellen.

The fourth season of *Ellen* started on September 18, 1996. Though Disney and ABC had not agreed to the coming out plan yet, DeGeneres and staff continued to prepare “The Puppy Episode.” Throughout the season, it was hinted that Ellen was a lesbian several times in the show; for example, she said she had been in the closet and “Yeah, there’s plenty of room, but it’s not very comfortable” when asked where she was. The script for the episode was written on the paper which could not be photocopied and they put it into a shredder every night in order for it not to be disclosed; all the staff wore wrist bands for security reasons. However, the whole script was read in a radio show prior to the broadcast, and the next day ABC finally admitted that Ellen Morgan would come out six months after the first leak of the news. During the shooting of the episode, there was a bomb threat in the studio. Shortly before the broadcasting of the coming out episode, DeGeneres finally admitted that she was a lesbian in three media. In the *Time* magazine cover story (April 14, 1997), her picture was on its front page with a caption, “Yep, I’m Gay” (Figure 1). Then she was interviewed on ABC’s *20/20* (April 25, 1997). The last was *Oprah Winfrey Show* (April 30, 1997) in which she was with her girlfriend, an actress, Anne Heche. DeGeneres joined the White House correspondent’s dinner with Heche, which became a headline the next day with a picture taken with the then President Clinton. Finally, in the midst of the great attention, the episode was aired on April 30, 1997.

Some 42 million people all over the United States watched the episode. Parties were held to watch the historical episode; one in Birmingham, Alabama, where a local branch of ABC had decided not to broadcast the episode, collected over 3,000 people.

On September 24, 1997, the fifth and the last season of *Ellen* started. The rating was not good; only 12 million people watched the show. Chastity Bono, a spokesperson of GLAAD, was reported having said that the show was “too gay” to the interviewer from *Daily Variety*. “Too gay” was quoted as a front-page head line of *Variety*, which consequently put the program into a corner. *Ellen* was cancelled after the fifth season.

Because both Ellens, as a character and a real-life DeGeneres, had not come out earlier, the first, the second and the third season of *Ellen* did not have an explicitly lesbian element. However, there were some implications whether they were intended or not. For example, Ellen meets a man of her dreams but he is a horrible kisser (“A Kiss is Still a Kiss” broadcasted on April 6, 1994). Moreover, she stopped dating after the second season.

Besides “The Puppy Episode” in which she came out, there were several episodes worth mentioning here, particularly in the fifth season. A British actress, Emma Thompson appeared as herself as a guest star in an episode. Ellen becomes an assistant of Thompson and finds out two secrets about her. One is that she is a lesbian, and the other and more shocking is that she is from Ohio, not from Britain (“Emma,” b. November 19, 1997). After Ellen’s coming out, being a lesbian was depicted naturally in the program. By suggesting another issue to compare it with lesbianism comically, the show suggested that her sexuality was not a bigger issue than where she was from. This sends the audience an effective political message because it undermined the norm that put an excessive meaning on sexuality. Another episode depicts the world where being gay is “normal;” heterosexual people are minority there. This episode shows a confusion of a heterosexual character in the gay world. The title of the episode, “It’s a Gay, Gay, Gay, Gay World!” reminds us of the song, “It’s a Small World” by Disney, which is the parent company of ABC. If the all-American image of Disney and the conflict about a broadcasting of the coming out episode are considered, satirical elements implied in this title are clear (b. February 25, 1998). In the last episode, while helping her parents to reconcile, Ellen starts to think about taking the relationship with her girlfriend to the next level: marriage (“Vows” b. July 22, 1998). Throughout the fifth season, the show focuses on Ellen’s new life as a lesbian.

Ellen Morgan found and admitted that she was a lesbian for the first time in her life and came out to people around her in the end of the fourth season. It was natural for the successive fifth season to focus on her sexuality because it became the central matter in the character’s life. It was also natural that the show included political elements because the personal matter here was destined to be political. When someone wants to marry another person on a television show, it is usually not political if they were marrying the opposite sex. But when Ellen and her girlfriend wanted to get married, the scene was inevitably perceived as embodying political elements because it was prohibited by law at the time.

Will & Grace –Not Gay Enough?

Will & Grace (1998) started only six months after *Ellen* finished its last season. At a press conference, a lot of questions were raised on how far they would go in terms of a depiction of homosexuality.⁷ While *Ellen* was criticized as “too gay” by some, *Will & Grace* was implied as “not gay enough” by others. Producers answered that Will’s gayness was not a central matter of the series because Will was already out from the beginning. They would focus on the friendship between Will and his female friend Grace and their priority was on how funny the show was.⁸

In many ways, *Will & Grace* tried not to be controversial. The program was launched after the successes of Hollywood films like *The Object of My Affection* (1998) and *My Best Friend’s Wedding* (1997), whose main characters were a gay man and a straight woman. Like these films, the main focus of the program is not controversial homosexuality but the friendship between a woman and a man who happens to be gay. The producers set up the background that Will had just broken up with his long-time boyfriend, so that they did not have to depict Will’s relation-

ship with men for the time being. Max Mutchnick, the openly gay producer of the series, said that Will and Jack originally had been one character, but they separated a stereotypically flamboyant element from the lead character Will and put it on a sub-lead character, Jack.⁹

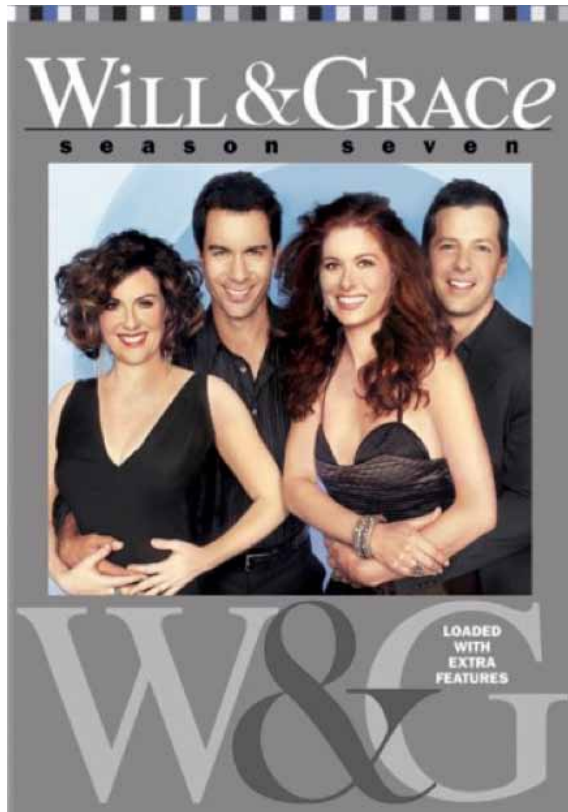


Figure 2. Characters from Will & Grace.

While Jack does not have a proper job and anyone can identify him as gay, Will is a lawyer and looks straight in his appearance. Eric McCormack who plays Will is straight, unlike Ellen DeGeneres who played Ellen Morgan.

In *Will & Grace*, especially at the beginning, no serious love relationship among the gay characters is depicted, so that intimate depictions between same-sex people are avoided. Since Will is delineated as a person who is not good at romantic relationships, he never has a long-term relationship in the series. Though Jack seems to be good at relationships, his love life is not the focus. Instead, love scenes are presented in different ways. Will and Jack are together half-naked in bed in one episode. But it is only for comic effects because they were drunk and unconscious. They do not have romantic feelings for each other at all and both deny that something happened between them (“Dames at Sea” b. September 25, 2003). In multiple episodes, Will and Grace think about having a baby (“A Buncha White Chicks Sit-tin’ Around Talkin’” b. May 9, 2002, “A.I.: Artificial Insemination” b. May 16, 2002, and “The Kid Stays Out of the Picture” b. October 10, 2002). Although the audience knows that Will is gay and they are not attracted sexually to each other, what they see is a male and female couple thinking to have a child, not a same-sex couple.

Though there are kiss and bed scenes between gay people in the program, they are not romantic. While sub-characters become gay dads, what Will thinks about is to have a baby with Grace; Will's real relationship with a man is not depicted. The other gay leading character, Jack is not engaged in his romantic relationship, either. Though he is depicted as "super-gay" enough, like Grace says, "My dog knows you're gay," and Will says, "Dead people know you're gay," his gayness is a gesture without desire in a sense (Pilot episode, b. September 21, 1998). *Will & Grace* presents two gay lead characters but avoids depicting their sexual desire.

Though *Will & Grace* tries to avoid being as controversial as *Ellen*, there are still many educational and political elements in the show. The show tackles the homophobia that many gay men have. Will's inner homophobia is depicted in various episodes. For example, in "Will Works Out" (b. April 22, 1999), Will is embarrassed when Jack comes to his gym and behaves flamboyantly in front of his fellow workers. When Will goes out with a ballet dancer, he is hesitant to introduce him to his friends ("Jingle Balls" b. December 13). In these episodes, Will has to face his inner homophobia and finds out that his attitude towards gay people are problematic.

In the episode whose title is a parody of Arthur Kopit's play, "Oh Dad, Poor Dad, He's Kept Me in the Closet and I'm So Sad" (b. February 15, 2000), Will's father introduces Will and Grace as a couple marrying soon to his colleagues at a party. At the end, however, he proudly re-introduces Will as his gay son. Another episode with obviously political depiction is "Acting Out" (b. February 29, 2000). Will and Jack are disappointed when a kiss scene between male lovers in a television soap opera they had looked forward to seeing is off camera. They go to NBC (National Broadcasting Company), which broadcasts *Will & Grace*, to file a complaint. When they find that the network does not take the matter seriously, they demonstrate a kiss in front of the NBC camera shooting live at the Rockefeller Center. This reflects "Kiss-in," a political demonstration of same-sex kisses in public space by Queer Nation, a gay activist group known for their confrontational tactics, in the 1990s.¹⁰ In another episode, Jack pretends as if he were straight in the place giving a program to convert homosexuals into heterosexuals ("Girls, Interrupted" b. May 2, 2000). Will and Jack's gay friends become dads in another. ("Husbands and Trophy Wives" b. October 19, 2000). Even when the sitcom tried not to be too controversial, it depicted social issues gay people had to face such as homophobia from society and within themselves, whether or not they can have a family, and problems of gay conversion therapy.

Outside the program, in 1999, the four main cast members protested in a 30-second TV spot against Proposition 22, which would limit the legal definition of marriage to the union between a man and a woman. Mutchnick asked them and they agreed to do it though NBC did not admit it officially. The casts said in the spot: "On March 7, Californians will go to the polls to vote either for or against basic civil rights."¹¹ They presented their political comment because there were many people who did not regard the right for gay people to get married as a civil right. The show lasted for eight seasons and made a significant impact on many Ameri-

cans especially those who did not know gay people in person. There were fewer people who were openly gay back then and the program showed funny and perfectly “normal” people who happened to be gay. The show was successful in changing peoples’ perspective on gay people. Joe Biden, the Vice President of the United States in Obama administration, mentioned the show; “I think *Will & Grace* did more to educate the American public more than almost anything anybody has done so far,” when he publicly said that he supported same sex marriage for the first time.¹² Just three days later, President Obama finally said he supported same sex marriage.

Though the show finished its last season in 2006, a special episode was released online to urge people to vote in the 2016 presidential election. The episode received good responses and the network decided to restart the show. A new season started in 2017 and it has already been renewed for two more seasons.¹³

Looking

Lastly, I will analyze *Looking* to make a point about how much progress American television media has made on LGBT representation. *Looking*, premiered in 2014, lasted for two seasons and was featured as a special TV movie by HBO, a cable TV network. The rarity of the show was that it depicted three gay friends and their relationships and lives at its center. It was called by some a gay version of *Sex and the City* because the same cable network created these shows. Though there had been numerous shows similar to *Sex and the City*, *Looking* was the first TV show aired by a major network focusing on gay characters’ love lives. Set in San Francisco, one of the two major cities with large gay population and culture besides New York City, at the center are Patrick and his two friends, all of them gay. Unlike gay lead characters in *The Object of My Affection* and *Best Friend’s Wedding*, they are not just the heroine’s friends who are funny and help her every time she is dumped by her boyfriend. In the beginning, the show follows Patrick meeting a guy on subway and gradually kindling their relationship, calling in sick and going on a date, and getting to know each other. There are so many scenes like this with straight couples in any given TV shows but not with same sex couples as the central characters.

This demonstrates significant progress from *Will & Grace* and other TV programs with gay characters in the past. LGBT characters are now depicted as full human beings and the audience can see them as real people. It helps LGBT audience to feel that they are fully represented and non-LGBT audience to feel close to LGBT people as if they were their friends or neighbors.

Theater in the U.S.: Revivals of Epic Gay Plays (The Boys in the Band, Torch Song, and Angels in America)

Theater is an important art media that has dealt with homosexuality for a long time. Before the 1970s homosexuality in plays was most of the time hidden between the lines. For example, in one of his best-known plays, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), Tennessee Williams depicts complicated but close relationship between a male lead and his dead college football teammate without calling it homosexuality. After characters and playwrights came out of the closet, gay plays were about their lives under discrimination, liberation, or coming out stories. *The Boys in*

the Band is one of the first plays with gay characters who are at least openly gay among themselves. *Torch Song* deals with a gay man trying to live his life facing discrimination. When AIDS hit the gay community in the 1980s and the 1990s, AIDS plays depicted their battles, struggles, and tragedies. *Angels in America* is the best example for this category. Moreover, recent plays since the 2000s portray new gay relationships after same sex marriage was legalized in 2016.¹⁴

In 2017 and 2018 Broadway seasons, three major revival productions of the epic gay plays mentioned above were presented. This does not seem a coincidence. Regardless of the advancement of LGBT people's rights, which seemed only to be going forward, the gains are in danger of becoming precarious again under the current administration. These revival productions seem to try to tell us not to forget the history of struggle and remind us of the importance of continuing the fight.

Boys in the Band

Boys in the Band was originally opened at an off-Broadway theater in 1968. It was the first major play depicting gay characters without hiding their sexuality. Getting together for a birthday party, they talk candidly about their lives. It was well received from the audience partly because the subject matter was sensational. A lot of reviewers, however, did not hide their homophobia when the show opened. Martin Gotteried in *Women's Wear Daily* warned readers to be careful because the play was entirely homosexual. On the surface, the reviewer seems to criticize the play but, actually what he dislikes is not the content but homosexuality itself:

The characters keep talking about love (or play cruel truth-games about love) but their love is, I think, in the most horrifying sense, shallow and perverse. Perhaps homosexuals really can love each other but "The Boys in the Band" doesn't show it. And one more matter—perhaps it's my thing but I just can't take guys dancing with each other. It only looks like pathetic imitation of men with women.¹⁵

His homophobia is overtly shown in the quotation although the reviewer appears to be careful not to generalize by adding, "I think" and "perhaps it's my thing." The phrase "pathetic imitation of men with women" is inadequate and thoughtless even when the context of the time is taken into consideration. Although the off-Broadway production was a hit and groundbreaking with the presentation of gay characters, reviews like this show how strong the society's homophobia was.

Moreover, gay characters in the play have homophobia in themselves, too. One character says to another:

You're a sad and pathetic man. You're a homosexual and you don't want to be, but there's nothing you can do to change it. Not all the prayers to your god, not all the analysis you can buy in all the years you've got left to live. You may one day be able to know a heterosexual life if you want it desperately enough. If you pursue it with the fervor with which you annihilate. But you'll always be homosexual as well. Always Michael. Always. Until the day you die. (125)

This inner homophobia of characters in the 1968 play is in stark contrast to the 2018 revival Broadway production which features openly gay actors including Zachery Quinto, Matt Bomber, Jim Parsons, and Andrew Rannels, all of whom are very successful in Hollywood. The director Joe Mantello is openly gay and one of the best directors now in American theater. One of the producers, Ryan Murphy, who is also gay, is the leader of creating LGBT friendly TV shows and films, such as *Glee* and *American Horror Stories*, just to name a few.

It has been almost 50 years since the original production and younger LGBT audience may not understand why the characters had to struggle with their strong inner homophobia. However, it should still be relevant to the audience because this kind of homophobia in American society has never gone away. Another importance of this production is that it shows how times have changed in a positive way by featuring “out and proud” successful actors and staff members. In the original production, actors had to risk their career to play gay characters. Now actors are openly gay and play characters from a different era, which reminds the audience of the advancement of the society and more importantly, encourage the audience to continue seeking further advancement of the LGBT cause.

Torch Song

Torch Song, the new version of Harvey Fierstein’s *Torch Song Trilogy*, finished the acclaimed off-Broadway run and came back on Broadway in fall 2018. The original Broadway production opened in 1982. Written before that, the play is set in pre-AIDS days. Centered on a drag queen played by Fierstein himself in the original production, the trilogy depicts his life through three phases: his relationship with his bisexual boyfriend, his stable life with another boyfriend and its end with the boyfriend’s tragic death by a hate crime. Finally the play ends with his prejudiced mother visiting him and his adopted son. The play was a hit by unapologetically presenting a gay drag queen’s life and relationships.

Similar to *The Boys in the Band*, *Torch Song* also shows the advancement that society has made. Now same-sex couples can marry and hate crimes do not happen as often. The audience are reminded how it was for gay people to live back then compared to what kind of life they can live now. At the same time, just like the mother in the play shows to her son, there is still homophobia and hate crimes are still committed all over the U.S.

Angels in America

The original Broadway production of *Angels in America* started in 1993. In February 2018, the acclaimed Britain’s National Theatre production started its run on Broadway. This first revival production on Broadway reassures the audience that *Angels* is the best American play in decades, the timing of the revival adding even better appreciation. Set in 1985 and 1986, *Angels*, with two parts and over seven hours, depicts wide range of American history and politics with many characters. Prior, the main character, has AIDS and is told that he is a prophet by an angel visiting him through his apartment ceiling. Louis, his boyfriend, leaves him for Joe, a republican closeted Mormon whose mentor is Roy Cohn, who is based on a real

historical figure. Belize, a former drag queen and nurse, helps Prior to go through the hardship. Belize, who is African American, and Louis, who is Jewish, argue about racism and liberalism in America.

Roy Cohn, in real life, helped Senator Joseph McCarthy in his 1950s Red Scare campaign, in which he accused people of communism. Even though he was gay himself and eventually died of AIDS, Cohn accused gay people during the Red Scare. What makes this revival production timelier is that Cohn was a mentor to the current president Donald Trump. In the play, Cohn claims to his doctor that he is not homosexual:

Like all labels they tell you one thing and one thing only; where does an individual so identified fit in the food chain, in the pecking order? Not ideology, or sexual taste, but something much simpler: clout. Not who fucks me, but who will pick up the phone when I call, who owes me favors. This is what a label refers to. Now to someone who does not understand this, homosexual is what I am because I have sex with men. But really this is wrong. Homosexuals are not men who sleep with other men. Homosexuals are men who in fifteen years of trying cannot get a puissant antidiscrimination bill through City Council. Homosexuals are men who know nobody and who nobody knows. Who have zero clout. (45)

Roy Cohn is saying that only important thing for a man is clout, the power. He claims that he is not homosexual because he has the power that gay people don't in politics. For him, the gender of the person whom he has sex with does not matter. More importantly, his perception of his sexuality or reasoning for it reminds us how President Trump, his mentee, currently deals with the LGBT community. Trump does not care about LGBT people not because he is religious or that he does not like them. Trump only seems to be concerned with whether or not he can use their political power, which is why he pretended he was pro-LGBT claiming that he would be president for everyone. However, he is now doing otherwise in order to appeal to religious conservatives. Although the play is set in the 1980s depicting mainly gay characters, the revival production shows how relevant the story still is, giving the audience an important perspective on how American politics is right now.

LGBT Visibility in Japan: Through TV Programs

In Japan, people's perception of LGBT issues is in many cases more conservative than in the U.S.. Progress had been slow in the past, but it is actually happening rapidly in recent years. This is partly because people can see how the U.S and other countries are making progress on LGBT issues. Here I will analyze three TV programs that portray LGBT representations in Japanese media.

Before focusing on these TV programs, I look at an example to show how much and how rapidly the society in Japan is changing. A comedy duo named Tunnels had a popular skit in which one of them played a character called "Homooda

Homoo” in the 1980s and the 1990s. Though the character said it was just a rumor, he was seemingly gay as his name showed. His makeup and behavior were offensively stereotypical. The character appeared for the first time since then for their show’s 30-year anniversary program that aired on September 27th, 2017. LGBT groups protested this revival of the character. Many people raised their voices through social media, too. To many in the gay audience, having seen the character on television when they were young was a traumatic experience. They were afraid that they would be laughed at or bullied in school if they gave any hint of being gay. The speed and volume of the response against this character’s revival was unprecedented. The president of the Fuji TV network promptly apologized at a press conference.¹⁷

However, acclaimed film director, Beat Takeshi (also known as Kitano Takeshi) who was a featured guest on the program, said this about the controversy in a tabloid newspaper opinion column:

LGBT groups should be glad. The fact that the comedy show depicted them means they were acknowledged. If they complain to the depiction, they admit that they are not normal. Don’t they like the fact that they were shown in a comedy? Is this situation similar to when homeless people or handicapped people are laughed at in comedy shows? Is this why we cannot laugh at gay people, they are not normal? There should be more tolerance with which they can laugh at this.¹⁸

It was not surprising to hear this from Beat Takeshi who once said that if same sex marriage is approved, perhaps people can be married to animals when his TV show reported the legalization of same sex marriage in the U.S.¹⁹

However, LGBT visibility in Japan is in fact rapidly rising in spite of these kind of negative responses from conservatives and people of the relatively older generation. Here I look at three TV shows which was broadcast quite recently with remarkably positive LGBT characters.

In *Tonarino Kazokuwa Aoku Mieru* (The Glass Is Greener on the Other Side, 2018), four families live in a cooperative house. Each family has their own problems. For example, one couple is having a difficult time conceiving a child; one family has a mother desperately playing the role of a conservative mother and failing at it. Another is a gay couple: a closeted architect and his younger boyfriend. The heroine’s reaction when she finds out that they are a couple is positive and supportive. The older man of the gay couple comes out to his mother and gets her negative reaction. When the couple receives partnership certificate in a Setagaya ward office in Tokyo, his mother eventually changes her mind and shows up to congratulate them. This show was groundbreaking because it presented gay men as a loving couple with other heterosexual couples. Although they are not lead characters, they were fully depicted as real people with their own happiness and hardships.



Figure 3. Characters from *Tonarino Kazokuwa Aoku Mieru*. (www.fujitv.co.jp/tonari_no_kazoku/chart/index.html).



Figure 4. *Joshiteki Seikatsu (Life as a Girl)*. (www6.nhk.or.jp/drama/pastprog/detail.html?i=4670).

Joshiteki Seikatsu (Life as a Girl) (2018) depicts a life of a transgender lesbian woman. Transgender issues get comparatively more attention in Japan than other LGBT issues. For example, an earlier popular high school TV drama called *Kinpachi-Sensei* featured a struggling female student who had trouble with her gender identity in 2001 when there were almost no serious depiction of homosexual characters on television. In contrast, in *Joshiteki Seikatsu*, the heroine works for a fashion company as a woman and her colleagues already know she is transgender. Not only her struggles with her gender identity but also her lesbian sexuality is depicted in the program. In one episode, she visits her hometown and encounters her brother and her father from whom she had run away when she was young. In another episode, she goes to a party with her female colleagues and picks up a woman. The show was broadcast on NHK, the national broadcasting networks known for its relatively conservative views. Its audience is older and conservative, too. It is noteworthy that the show not only depicts a transgender woman but also presents her as a real person with sexuality.



Figure 5. Characters from *Ototo no Otto* (www.nhk.or.jp/pd/otto/).

Ototo no Otto (*My Brother's Husband*, 2018) is based on a manga with the same title by Gengoro Tagame. The three-episode show depicts the main character, Yaichi, who lost his estranged twin brother who had left for Canada and got married to another man. The show starts when the Canadian husband comes to Japan to visit his husband's brother and his daughter. Yaichi gradually understands his late gay brother through knowing his brother in law. He realizes that there is prejudice toward gay people in people's minds and loses his own by looking at how his young daughter sees her favorite uncle. Even though Tagame is an erotic manga artist, this manga is not overtly sexual and is meant to be educational for everyone. Because one of the couple is already dead, there is no scene with kissing or embracing between gay men. The Canadian husband is played by former Sumo wrestler Baruto, who is popular among the wider audience. This was also broadcast on NHK, which is the sole broadcaster of Sumo wrestling matches. This TV drama must have changed the view of even conservative and older audiences toward gay people.

LGBT characters in these shows, just as they were presented in the American sitcoms and dramas, make the audience prepare for the coming out by actual people around them. They portray positive images of LGBT people even though viewers may not actually know anyone LGBT. In some cases, when a gay man in Japan comes out to his parents, they think that he will start wearing makeup and dressing like a woman, because all they know about the image of being gay is from TV personalities, who in most cases are gay men in drag. There are few celebrities or politicians who are openly LGBT in Japan. But this is changing because of the above positive representations in TV shows.

Moreover the change rapidly happening in Japan right now is partly because of pressure from outside. One of the biggest factors is that Japan will host Tokyo Olympics in 2020.²⁰ Although discussion on marriage equality has not gained any momentum so far, several municipal governments, such as, Shibuya and Setagaya wards in Tokyo, Sapporo city, and Naha city, have started issuing partnership certificates since 2015.

Conclusion

Since the gay liberation in 1970s, visibility of LGBT people in the U.S. has been increasing through representations in media such as theater and television. These have made it easier for more and more LGBT people to come out because society has been changing little by little to accept LGBT people because of those representations seen in media. People got to know LGBT people as their family members, friends, neighbors, or colleagues. As a result, prejudice and discrimination have decreasing in many people's minds and a greater part of society is accepting LGBT people as equal citizens, instead of just tolerating them.

On the other hand, the manner in which the Trump administration is dealing with LGBT people now is unnerving. As I argued above, the revival productions of epic gay theater works in light of current political challenges encourage us to remember the history and to keep on fighting for equality.

Finally, in Japan, LGBT visibility is far behind that found in the U.S. Fortunately, it is rapidly on the increase especially in recent years. Although Japan still has a long way to go to achieve the legalization of same-sex marriage, it continues to go forward partly because of the pressure from outside. The U.S. history of LGBT advancement continues to influence Japan in a positive way. At the same time, it gives a warning that the LGBT movement in Japan may endure setbacks at any time.

Endnotes

- 1 See Sanders 2016.
- 2 See Frizell 2016.
- 3 Editorial Board. *New York Times* Apr. 17, 2017.
- 4 See for example, Associated Press. "Trump Order Would Ban Most Transgender Troops from Serving."
- 5 See GLAAD 2016.
- 6 See, for example, Tropiano (245-249) for how "the puppy episode" was made and the controversy around it.
- 7 See Tropiano (249-253) on the detailed historical stand point of *Will & Grace* compared to *Ellen* when it started.
- 8 As for the conference, see Milvy.
- 9 As to how McCormack created the sitcom, see for example, Fallon.
- 10 As for *Queer Nation's* activism such as kiss-in, see for example, Signorile (88-89).
- 11 See Herscher 1999.

- 12 See Abramovitch 2012.
- 13 The show is being well received. See more detail in O'Connell.
- 14 *Mothers and Sons* (2014) by Terrence McCally was the first Broadway play that had a married gay couple. There are also Off-Broadway plays like *Papa Woof Dada Hot* (2015 by Peter Pernel), *Gently Down the Stream* (2017 by Martin Sherman), *Daniel's Husband* (2017 by Michael McKeever).
- 15 See Gottfried 1968.
- 16 See, for example, a blog post by an NPO called Rainbow Action.
- 17 For the response against the depiction and the apology issued by the president of the network see an article: "Fuji TV Variety Sketch Deemed Homophobic, President Issues Apology" by Nijihiro News.
- 18 From an opinion column by Beat Takeshi in Tokyo Sports. Oct. 31, 2017.
- 19 See a blog post by an anonymous author in "Beat Takeshi-no karakaito Washington Post shino shinshina ronpyono rakusa." Aito Kunouno Nikki (in Japanese).
- 20 The International Olympics Committee introduced an anti-discrimination clause prohibiting any form of discrimination including sexual orientation and gender. (Gibson 2014).

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